

From the Wyoming Department of Health

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Swine Flu (H1N1): An Early Perspective

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Over the last several years a series of new and emerging diseases have gained attention around the world, including Wyoming. We watched the West Nile virus march across the United States toward us. It reached our state, and by now most residents are aware of how it spreads and the potential human threat. We also saw Severe Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (SARS) make its way from Southeast Asia to North America, affecting many individuals in Toronto, Canada.

The latest newcomer on the world health scene is the swine flu strain (H1N1) of the influenza virus. This virus has rapidly spread across the planet, infecting thousands of people. Since April, it's been difficult to open a newspaper or turn on the television without seeing a story about this disease.

Swine flu (H1N1) is in Wyoming now, and probably in every county. Due to the new strain, we are seeing more flu around the state than usual for this time of year and it has been increasing. So far the number of reported cases is nowhere near what we typically experience during the seasonal flu peak.

Influenza, including swine flu, is spread by large-droplet or small-droplet infection, as well as by direct surface contact. It can be as simple as passing it on to the next person who uses our grocery store cart because we coughed into our hands and then used the cart handle.

Swine flu has been showing itself to be very similar to seasonal flu so our recommendations have been in line with what we tell people every year: Use good hand-washing technique, use your elbow or sleeve when you cough or sneeze, stay home from work or school when you're ill, and contact your healthcare provider when you have serious symptoms such as trouble breathing. These common-sense measures will go far in preventing swine flu in you and your family.

Planning is the cornerstone of any effort to lessen the overall impact of a disease. Long before swine flu emerged this spring, public health officials began preparing for such a potential influenza scenario. At the Wyoming Department of Health, we worked together with healthcare providers in our communities, local health departments and other state agencies.

As a result, we had a flu plan in place before this situation began that has been a helpful resource. It can be found online at www.health.wyo.gov. The plan discusses the expected public health response, including strategies to prevent diseases transmission, use and distribution of antiviral medications and vaccines and school closures.

Many people have had questions about antiviral medications such as Tamiflu. For people who are ill with swine flu, they have been shown to shorten the duration of symptoms. A few years ago, a special contract with pharmaceutical companies gave states the opportunity to purchase a fixed allotment of antiviral medications in case a possible future flu situation created a high demand. Wyoming purchased its entire allowable allotment, and these medications are strategically placed around the state.

A vaccine for swine flu (H1N1) is still in the manufacturing process and expected to be ready sometime this fall. Many details for the use of the vaccine, safety and other issues still need to be worked out, but vaccine distribution are mainstays in most local plans.

School closures have been another hot topic. Schools are often closed out of fear and misunderstanding rather on sound scientific evidence. Safety for our children is the most important concern, but to date, Wyoming health and school officials have not believed that school closures were necessary. The Wyoming Department of Health has worked closely with the Wyoming Department of Education to prepare recommendations, if and when they are needed.

As the summer progresses we will continue to monitor the disease and provide regular updates and recommendations. My biggest concern is the safety of all Wyoming residents, a responsibility I take very seriously.

It's important that we remain vigilant for this and other new and emerging diseases. Analyzing, communicating, understanding and effectively dealing with new and emerging diseases is what public health does best. Swine flu (H1N1) is no exception.

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